Chapter Six

Summer comes to Grand Tower in May. The leafed-out trees screen the view. Snakes hang in the green willow walls that sweep the river's edge. Cass and me had cut each other out of our winter underwear, and we were all barefoot, all but Delphine.

The windows of our house blazed with lamplight every night now. We'd have been a landmark, a lighthouse astride the Devil's Backbone. And the boats still came. We didn't know how quiet the first weeks of war can be. We had no experience of war.

The Southern boats ran low in the water with their burden of cotton bales. Even now, a few holdouts still believed

that King Cotton might keep the peace. And most every New Orleans boat brought fresh provisions from Delphine's *maman*. Curry Marshall and Noah were forever lugging a trunk up the Backbone, another treasure chest from Madame Clemence Duval. Eats and coffee beans and a grinder, salts and powders and all manner of things you didn't know you needed.

Her *maman* sent up the hand mirror that Delphine had left behind. She'd been half crazy without it, and it drew me like a magnet. I'd never seen myself in a mirror before. I'd seen my reflection in a pan of water and even in the river, rippled. But me and Cass always fixed each other's hair. We didn't have a mirror in the house, though you'd catch a glimpse of yourself after dark in a windowpane. They must have had one down at Rodgers's store, but I don't remember it. Now I stole every look I could get at Delphine's mirror. It was gold, with violets painted on the back. I wasn't overencouraged by what I saw, but it made me so real. I'm not sure I knew that I existed and took up space of my own before I saw me in that mirror.

A summer wardrobe came for Delphine: dimities and lavender lawn, straw bonnets, embroidered chemises. And muslins and calicoes for Calinda. My head swam.

People naturally talked. What else was there to talk about but them Secesh gals, that Delphine and that Calinda? A rumor went round that Calinda was an escaped slave. And for giving her shelter, us Pruitts were being called Republicans. Before Fort Sumter, an escaped slave was apt to be

sold back South. Now it was only talk, though why an escaped slave would bring her mistress with her nobody seemed to know.

Mama didn't like any kind of talk behind our back, even if it was hogwash. But all her thoughts were trained on Noah. He still drilled in the road. Every day she stayed him from war was a little victory. If Delphine was helping to keep him with us, so be it. Mama could just about put up with Noah moon-calfing around the place as long as he was there. She melted a little more on the day Delphine drew out of a New Orleans trunk the grandest dress I ever saw. When she held it up, it was far too long in the skirts for herself.

It was for Mama, a gift from Madame Duval. A bottle-green silk with a lace bertha and all the horsehair petticoats to go under. Mama naturally didn't want to take it. A gift was a little too close to charity to suit her. But I watched her close and knew she was seeing herself in that dress, and the woman she might have been. Delphine didn't reason with her long before Mama caved in. Still, it was too fine for her to touch. "Tilly," she told me, "take it up to the death drawer."

Like everybody else, we had us a sick drawer and a death drawer in a bureau along the upstairs hall. The sick drawer held our remedies. The death drawer kept a supply of winding-sheets and a selection of garments for when the time come. Mama meant she'd be buried in this dress. You ought to have seen the look on Delphine's face.

I suppose it give Mama comfort to know that she'd be laid out in such elegant raiment. In the long run, she was never to wear it at all. Nobody did.

It's up there in the death drawer yet.

While Delphine would starve in a pantry, Calinda would thrive in a wilderness, and did. I think she only went up to the devil's footstool to mope with Cass once. Ever after she saw to it that they were out in the timber, looking for whatever might be useful: horehound leaves and lady slipper and wild strawberries. At the big spring, they found watercress, and Calinda made us salads out of it, which we weren't used to.

She went into business, meeting every steamboat that stopped. Down the Backbone she'd stride in fresh aprons and her best bandannas—"tignons," as Delphine said they were called. Heaped high on a tray slung around her neck were her own pecan pralines, each candy done up in a paper frill. Our kitchen was a swamp of seething sugar and bubbling molasses. Calinda boiled up and dropped out pralines pretty nearly around the clock. Cass rose out of her trundle at daybreak to build up the fire.

Grand Tower came to expect Calinda passing in her big-tailed tignon. Her who never raised her voice stood at the foot of the gangplank and sang out, "PRAWLEEENS, NEW ORLEANS STYLE." And they were very shortly pounding down the plank to get at them, passengers and crew alike.

Cass hung back in public, but Calinda needed her to fetch and carry. Cass was soon down there with her, handing over the pralines while Calinda caught the money in her apron.

Oh, that first day when she dumped all them coins onto the kitchen table! I wanted to bar the door. In the end, we took to putting all the money they brought home in a tin can and hung it down the well.

I was to remember that spring as a golden time. It was wicked to think so. People were dying already. St. Louis blew sky-high on the tenth day of May. But we had light at our windows and talk at the table; we'd never et so good, there was ready money down the well, and we still had Noah.

Cass didn't find the time to mope and mourn now she had Calinda. Calinda was the sister Cass needed. I'd hugged her to me and wiped her nose. But she needed what I couldn't give. Her and Calinda spoke a language I was deaf to, a language of prophecies and cures, of visions and the medicines waiting out in the timber to heal the afflicted. They spoke in tongues foreign to me, even when they weren't speaking at all. And so I was sorry Cass had slipped away from my smothering arms, but glad in my heart she'd joined the living.

We sat through our glowing evenings, listening to Delphine's stories of New Orleans life, though very little of her own. We brought our chores closer to hear her tales. And like the girl in *Arabian Nights,* she never run dry. Cass

listened too while she watched Calinda lay out the cards at her end of the table.

Each day came to the same end. After whole evenings of silence, Calinda would sweep up her cards and announce, *"Mo kalle dodo."*

It didn't even sound like Delphine's French. But it seemed to mean she was going to bed. Calinda was a creature of few words and, I suppose, an example to us all.

Throughout our evenings, Noah never ran short of excuses to hover nearby. He turned cobbler to repair Delphine's slippers because their heels were forever coming off. He hunkered on the hearth with nails in his mouth, and Delphine spun her yarns to the tap of his hammer. Though I was never to be a needlewoman, I darned Noah's socks over an egg, and made a place for myself in the circle of lamplight. I caught a glimpse of happiness, and saw it was a bird on a branch, fixing to take wing.

The St. Louis news was all bad. The governor of Missouri had told Jeff Davis he'd better send help if he wanted another star in the Confederate flag. It was rumored that a boat come up from Baton Rouge, loaded with rifles. The Missouri militias were all for the South; the St. Louis militias were German and solid for the North. They clashed over the arsenal, and twenty-eight were killed.

Lightning struck that close, north of where we were. I naturally thought of Delphine's St. Louis aunt, Madame

LeBlanc. I wondered if, as Delphine would say, "she was murder in her bed." But Mama didn't like war talk in the house, and Delphine made no murmur of her aunt. Did I begin to wonder if Madame LeBlanc had ever existed at all?

But I tried not to look ahead, and so it was a golden time. And when it began to unravel the way things do, I had warning.

In the deepest part of the night, I came awake to see the trundle empty and Cass over on the windowsill. Her face was silvery wet with moonlight. She stared at what wasn't there, and I saw in her slump that it was the old Cass come back, Cass having a fearful vision.

She was so silent that I don't know what woke me. But she was bent in agony. One hand clutched the other arm, and she rocked back and forth, gray with pain.

I didn't go to her, God help me. I feared too much what she felt. I couldn't help her, and I didn't want to know. I must have slept again, but I'd known a warning when I saw one.

Only a day or so later Delphine and I were coming back up past the chicken yard from the privy when we seen a small parcel on the porch.

We never went near the woodshed in summer and we never went alone to the privy because of the snakes. It was hard to keep the weeds down, and there was that old story about the country woman in her privy who was bit from

below by a cottonmouth. It was one of them stories that never dies out, like Mrs. Champ Hazelrigg being et by her hogs. We always went to the privy in pairs, and one of us carried the hoe.

Delphine saw it first, a rag tied up in a bundle just where Curry Marshall had left the lamps. We dropped down on the porch stairs while I worked the knot, my mind a blank. There was nothing inside but a rock to make weight, two red ribbons lettered in gold, and a note folded up tight.

The ribbons were the prizes Curry Marshall had won for spelling at the bees years back at school, so the note was meant for me. Delphine knew by watching my face as I smoothed out the paper.

I'd never had a letter in my life, and precious few words from Curry Marshall's mouth.

Dear Tilly,

As your eyes scan this page, I am away with Mose and Jaret to Williamson County to join up with the good fellows there mustering under Thorndike Brooks and Harvey Hayes. We march south to Paducah or wherever we can find us a Confederate militia to soldier with.

Now that Captain Grant has organized a Northern regiment at Anna, Egypt's no place for them of my convictions. If I had me a pocket watch or anything of value, I would leave it in your safekeeping. Here find within my spelling ribbons instead.

They say that all the best oficers that ever come out of West

Point are on the Secesh side. I expect we'll have it over by Christmas.

May this find you as it leaves me,

Yours very truly,

C. Marshall

I read it through twice. If Curry could spell *officers,* he might have won blue ribbons instead of red. His letter chilled me, and stirred me up. My eyes didn't sting or moisten, but I felt like a turned-out glove. Delphine noticed.

"'Tain't a love letter," I told her. "Nothing like that."

Delphine gave one of her little shrugs. She wore fewer petticoats in this weather, and Calinda was too busy now to give her hair more than a lick and a promise. "A soldier must leave someone behind," she said. "What men do best is walk away from women. Wars are handy for that."

This seemed so worldly-wise I wondered if she could be nineteen.

"Curry says it's all apt to be over by Christmas."

Delphine shrugged that off too. "Wars are always to be over by Christmas. At least he fights on the side of right."

"But if Curry wins, Noah loses." Did it cross my mind they could both lose?

A quiet moment followed. There weren't many quiet moments in Delphine's vicinity, but now you could hear voices from town, and the river lapping the bank. We sat there with our skirttails tucked under us. At last she said,

"You are relieve it is the lamp boy who goes, and not Noah."

She read my heart aright. It was one of her talents. Sorry though I was to see Curry go, I could have burst into song right where we set that it wasn't Noah going. Not yet.

Somehow my heart could spare Curry. If war had never come—if Delphine had never come—it might have been different. But war took Curry away. And Delphine made me begin to look around myself, and farther from myself. I didn't know what to make of that great world she come from, but she made me want more in my small one. And so Curry and me wasn't to be.

It's as well I could spare him, because I never heard from him or of him again. People could vanish without a trace in them times, and you dreaded the next one who might.

They said that on the morning Curry's mother found him gone, she went to the timber and howled like a wolf with her grief and her fear. I thought of Mama.

Then in the middle of May, with Missouri turning on itself across the river, the blockade was enforced. The boats no longer ran between here and New Orleans, and so there was no turning back for Delphine and Calinda. I wondered what they thought about that, but Delphine would tell you exactly what she wanted you to hear, and Calinda didn't even tell that much.

I thought an empty river would put her out of the praline business. But the boats still ran on the upper Mississippi,

as far down as Cairo and up the Ohio River to Louisville that had decided to be neutral. So we got some boats, though fewer than before. Calinda met them all, calling out now, "LAST CHANCE FOR PRAWLEEENS, NEW ORLEANS STYLE." As the summer deepened, our kitchen was still hot as hinges with boiling sugar.

I well remember once when we heard a boat was coming down from Davenport. It must have been a Monday because Delphine and me were in the yard, and I was at the laundry tub. Though she could sew a fine seam, she did very little other work. Even on laundry day, she only sorted.

As I stirred our boiling clothes with my skirts hiked to keep them out of the fire, we heard the boat's whistle. Out of the house flounced Calinda with a mound of pralines on her tray. Right behind her come Cass, just as ready for business. Cass's wispy hair was tied up in one of Calinda's tignons. It made me smile to see Cass switching her skirts down the stairs like a scrawny, pale reflection of Calinda, including the tignon, tied in a tidy knot.

But the minute Delphine saw, she made a run for them. Quicker than thought, she snatched the tignon off Cass's head. Cass jumped a foot and shrank. Delphine turned on Calinda and shook the tignon in her face. I was glad not to hear what she said. When she pointed back to the laundry pot, I took it to mean that if Calinda let Cass wrap a tignon around her head again, Delphine would personally put it on the fire.

She won the battle, and the other two scurried off down the hill about their business, though Cass looked back in case Delphine was after them. Then she returned to her sorting. I pondered this, though I wasn't surprised she had a temper.

Was the tignon a sign and proof of slavery that would shame Cass, that scrawny scrap of white humanity? We'd seen pictures of slave women with their heads tied up in kerchiefs, like Calinda's, though not so elegant.

But Delphine, eyes still crackling, snapped across the laundry pot at me, "She has not earned the tignon, your sister!"

And what that could mean, I couldn't think.

Summer began to hang heavy. The garden wilted, and Cass's chickens drooped in whatever shade they could find. Every hot morning I couldn't draw breath until I saw Noah was still there. We heard the army was full of fifteen-year-old boys. They'd lied to get in, and the militias had pretended to believe them.

Then came the third week of July, and word from Manassas of the first big battle of the war, the Battle of Bull Run. It was off in the state of Virginia, but in this first great clash between North and South, the South had won.

People stared openmouthed at the Cairo newspaper pinned up at the landing, struck dumb by what we read. When our soldiers come up against General Jackson and his First Virginia, the "Stonewall Brigade," our boys cut and run.

We read how the women of Washington had ridden out that Sunday morning in high-wheeled buggies, with parasols and picnic hampers to watch the North finish off the South in a single skirmish. The women fled in a panic back to Washington, and running ahead of them were our soldiers, "all sense of manhood forgotten," according to the Cairo paper.

We didn't know what to think. It turned our world around. But from that day forth, all Egypt and Grand Tower for sure were solid for the North. The first boys who'd marched off in April to answer President Lincoln's call had been stoned in the road by the Democrats. But the Battle of Bull Run made Yankees out of us all because it was going to take every one of us to win it. The flag seemed to wave from every house, even from the doctor's office, though people said Dr. Hutchings was a peacemaker.

You'd have thought that being on the same side would have encouraged people to pull together. But people aren't made that way.